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# Birding Cameroon, part 1

## Northern Cameroon: Guinea Woodlands to Sahel

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Cameroon, straddling the border between West and Central Africa, is the sudden focus of a birding revival. Once the domain of only the most dedicated of birders, the avian riches of Cameroon are finally beginning to receive the popular attention they deserve. This renewed interest has undoubtedly been due to Nik Borrow and Ron Demey's thorough new field guide to West Africa<sup>1</sup> (whose nomenclature has been followed here) and Claude Chappuis' bird vocalisation compilation for the region<sup>2</sup>, as well as the discovery of new stakeouts for some of its harder-to-find species.

Cameroon is certainly a strategic destination to explore: its range of habitats stretches from rain forest to the edge of the Sahara and encompasses two of Africa's Endemic Bird Areas (EBAs), defined by BirdLife International as the continent's hotspots for restricted-range endemic birds<sup>4</sup>. The Cameroon Mountains EBA, a string of forested volcanic peaks, holds 26 highland species that are found nowhere else, including **Mount Kupe Bush-shrike** *Malaconotus kupeensis* and **Bannerman's Turaco** *Tauraco bannermani*, both of which have community-based conservation projects dedicated to protecting their habitats. At the base of these mountains are vast humid lowland forests, comprising the Cameroon and Gabon Lowlands EBA. Though harbouring only six endemics, caves deep within these forests are home to one of the world's most enigmatic creatures: the **Red-headed Picathartes** *Picathartes oreas*, probably Cameroon's most celebrated bird. North of these forest zones, the climate becomes drier and gives way to Sudan-Guinea savanna. This biome extends both into West and Central Africa and holds 45 biome-restricted species, including **Adamawa Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia hypopyrrha*, **Violet Turaco** *Musophaga violacea* and **Dybowski's Twinspot** *Euschistospiza dybowskii*. In the far north, the land descends into the Sahel biome, providing convenient access to the species found in this dry band, which abuts North Africa's Sahara desert. This combined diversity makes it the richest country for birding in West Africa, with c915 species having been

recorded. Cameroon surely offers some of the most exciting birding experiences on the continent.

This article, the first in a two-part series, overviews the essential birding sites of northern Cameroon, most of which have also been defined as Important Bird Areas<sup>3</sup>, focusing on the key species and their habitats. We make our way north from the vicinity of Ngaoundéré, central Cameroon's largest city on the cool Adamawa Plateau, downslope to the broad-leaved woodlands of the Bénoué plains, and finally to the Sahel at Waza National Park in the extreme north.

For practical access details to these sites, a number of reports are available on the Internet, including our own tour reports and annotated checklists ([www.birdingafrica.com](http://www.birdingafrica.com)). Also available free of charge is our detailed guide to birding in Cameroon for independent travellers (write to [cameroon@birdingafrica.com](mailto:cameroon@birdingafrica.com)).

### Ngaoundaba Ranch

Situated on the wooded Adamawa Plateau overlooking a crater lake, Ngaoundaba Ranch offers a picturesque introduction to northern Cameroon's varied avifauna. Cool, forested gullies crisscross lightly wooded uplands, holding an extraordinary number of localised and charismatic birds. Steep-sided banks provide great vantage points for viewing the canopy of the sheltered forests. Multi-coloured flocks of seedeaters rove along the rank forest edges. Among the more abundant **Black-crowned Estrilda** *nonnula* and **Orange-cheeked Waxbills** *E. melpoda*, search for family parties of **Black-bellied Firefinch** *Lagonosticta rara* and shy pairs of picture-perfect **Dybowski's Twinspot**. **Brown Twinspot** *Clytospiza monteiri* prefers the moister, ranker areas, particularly along the margin of the crater lake, whereas the scarce **Yellow-winged Pytilia** *Pytilia hypogrammica* can be found drinking at shaded pools.

Easier to spot in the gallery forest canopy are gaudy groups of **White-crested Turaco** *leucolophus* and **Ross's Turacos** *Musophaga rossae*, though both are likely to be heard before being seen. **Bamenda Apalis** *Apalis bamendae*, the only one of Cameroon's



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endemics to be found in the north of the country, and retiring Leaflove *Pyrrhurus scandens*, are also usually located by voice. Also watch for the little-known Willcocks's Honeyguide *Indicator willcocksii* along the forest edge, which may oblige by hawking insects at eye level, but beware of confusion with the very similar Lesser Honeyguide *I. minor*, which is also present. Blackcap Babbler *Turdoides reinwardtii* chatters alongside its plainer cousin, Brown Babbler *T. plebejus*. The cool, shady understorey is home to several special skulkers, including Grey-winged *Cossypha polioptera* and White-crowned Robin Chats *C. albicapilla*, which betray their presence with their melodious songs. The premier prize, however, is the curious Spotted Thrush Babbler *Ptyrticus turdinus*, a shy bird of uncertain taxonomic affinities that can prove elusive at the best of times. The unique black-and-yellow Oriole Warbler (Moho) *Hypergerus atriceps*, familiar to birders that have visited The Gambia, prefers thick tangles in the midstorey, particularly around the many palm fronds. In passing, you may spot Green-backed Woodpecker *Campethera cailliautii*, Square-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus ludwigii* or a Blue-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon malimbica* sitting motionless on its perch.

More bird activity can often be found in the surrounding woodlands, which host large mixed-species flocks. Among the most conspicuous birds are the typically vociferous Western Grey Plantain-eater *Crinifer piscator* and Senegal Parrot *Poicephalus senegalus*, and restless bands of Yellow-billed Shrike *Corvinella corvina*. Starling flocks are a key feature of the avifauna here and should yield not only Purple Lamprotornis *purpureus*, Bronze-tailed *L. chalcurus* and Splendid Glossy Starlings *L. splendidus*, but also the highly localised and particularly exquisite White-collared Starling

*Grafisia torquata*, the latter one of the most special of the Guinea woodland endemics. Senegal Eremomela *Eremomela pusilla*, White-shouldered Black Tit *Parus (leucomelas) guineensis*, Splendid Sunbird *Cinnyris coccinigaster*, Red-shouldered *Campephaga phoenicea* and White-breasted Cuckoo-shrikes *Coracina pectoralis*, White Helmet-shrike *Prionops plumatus*, Grey-headed Bush-shrike *Malaconotus blanchoti*, Black Wood-hoopoe *Rhinopomastus aterrimus*, Brown-backed Woodpecker *Dendropicos obsoletus* and the inconspicuous Spotted Creeper *Salpornis spilonotus* are all regular in the feeding flocks. Blue-bellied Roller *Coracias cyanogaster* is scarce, but has been recorded more regularly in recent years. Near the entrance to the ranch, where the woodland is particularly stunted, watch out for Red-winged Warbler *Heliolais erythroptera*. The bare, oft-burnt ground provides ideal habitat for Heuglin's Wheatear *Oenanthe (bottae) heuglini* and supports a small breeding population of Brown-chested Lapwing *Vanellus superciliosus*, an inconspicuous African plover that has an east-west migration across Africa. Tall-grassed areas, particularly around the lake, hold Whistling Cisticola *Cisticola lateralis* and Marsh Tchagra *Antichromis minutus*, whereas Double-spurred Francolin *Francolinus bicalcaratus* is fairly common where the grass is sparser. If you are exceptionally lucky you may find a Schlegel's Francolin *Francolinus schlegelii*, one of the ranch's most sought-after species, quietly scurrying through the grassy understorey.

For those who venture out after dark, a spotlighting session may prove very rewarding. African Scops Owl *Otus senegalensis* is common, and White-faced Owl *Ptilopsis leucotis* and Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus* are present in small numbers. Nightjar diversity is impressive: Freckled *Caprimulgus tristigma*, Long-tailed *C. climacurus* and Plain Nightjars *C. inornatus* occur, but these pale in comparison to spectacular Pennant-winged *Macrodipteryx vexillarius* and Standard-winged Nightjars *M. longipennis*. The latter frequently displays near the ranch entrance, and may be flushed from its day roost in burnt, rocky areas. The elusive Bronze-winged Courser *Rhinoptilus chalcopterus* also occurs: listen for its eerie call.

## Bénoué National Park

North of Ngaoundaba the road winds its way down the escarpment of the Adamawa Plateau onto the

### Captions to plates on pages 112 and 113

- 1 African Swallow-tailed Kite *Chelictinia riocourii*
- 2 Egyptian Plover *Pluvianus aegyptius*
- 3 Little Green Bee-eater *Merops pusillus*
- 4 Cricket Warbler *Spiloptila clamans*
- 5 Violet Turaco *Musophaea violacea*
- 6 White-collared Starling *Grafisia torquata*
- 7 African Moustached Warbler *Melochlha mentalis*
- 8 Blue-bellied Roller *Coracias cyanogaster*

seemingly endless, woodland-cloaked Bénoué plains. Low population pressures have left extensive areas intact, some of which have been incorporated into Bénoué National Park. The richest birding habitat is a broad band of gallery forest that follows the wide Bénoué River along the park's eastern border. **Black-headed Gonolek** *Laniarius erythrogaster*, dainty **Red-winged Grey Warbler** *Drymocichla incana*, **White-cheeked Oliveback** *Nesocharis capistrata*, **Black-bellied** and **Bar-breasted Firefinches** *Lagonosticta rufopicta*, and **Oriole Warbler** frequent the dense tangles. Larger stands of trees may shelter a roosting **Verreaux's Eagle Owl** *Bubo lacteus* or **Western Banded Snake Eagle** *Circaetus cinerascens*, **Vieillot's Barbet** *Lybius vieilloti*, a striking **Bearded Barbet** *L. dubius* or a dazzling pair of **Violet Turaco**. Here, too, one may find one of Africa's most attractive doves, **Adamawa Turtle Dove**, which can be seen drinking at pools along the riverbed. The undisputed highlight, however, is the eye-catching **Egyptian Plover** *Pluvianus aegyptius*, which actively chases insects along the exposed sandbars.

In the surrounding woodlands, mixed-species flocks regularly hold **Fine-spotted Woodpecker** *Campethera punctuligera*, **Yellow-bellied Hyliota** *Hyliota flavigaster*, **Senegal Batis** *Batis senegalensis*, **Pygmy Sunbird** *Hedydipna platura* and **Cabanis's Bunting** *Emberiza cabanisi*, while the stately **Abyssinian Ground Hornbill** *Bucorvus abyssinicus* can be seen pacing along determinedly. Harder work may be rewarded with **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater** *Merops hirundineus*, **Blue-bellied Roller**, **Red-winged Pytilia** *Pytilia phoenicoptera*, **Black-faced Firefinch** *Lagonosticta larvata*, **Streaky-headed Seedeater** *Serinus gularis* or **Brown-rumped Bunting** *Emberiza affinis*. Warblers abound in the rank grassy areas, with **African Moustached Melocichla** *Melocichla mentalis* and **Red-winged Warblers**, and **Red-faced Cisticola** *Cisticola erythropus*, **Winding** *C. galactotes*, **Croaking** *C. natalensis*, **Short-winged** *C. brachypterus*, **Rufous** *C. rufus* and **Dorst's Cisticola** *C. dorsti* all possible. **Stone Partridge** *Trilopachus petrosus* can often be seen scurrying from the roadside, whereas the secretive **White-throated Francolin** *Francolinus albogularis* prefers extensive grass cover, and **Four-banded Sandgrouse** *Pterocles quadricinctus* favours bare areas, often feeding in the road. With a touch of good fortune one may find an **Ovambo Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter ovampensis*, **White-fronted Black Chat**

*Myrmecocichla albifrons*, the scarce **Rufous-rumped Lark** *Pinarocorys erythropygia* or the rare **Emin's Shrike** *Lanius gubernator*.

### The extreme north: Waza and Mora

Lying on the edge of the Sahel, close to the border with Chad, Waza and Mora are the hottest and most arid areas in the country. While the majority of Cameroon's endemic species are found in the forests of the south, the extreme north holds some of Africa's most special species. The sparse grasslands near Mora are arguably the best place on the continent to search for the nomadic **Quail-plover** *Ortyxelos meiffrenii*, a long-legged relative of the buttonquails. Its camouflage is so effective that it can walk undetected between a group of birders, although, if surprised, it usually takes flight to reveal the white flashes in its primaries. Its superb camouflage is only outdone by **Golden Nightjar** *Caprimulgus eximius*, whose discovery here in March 2003 (see p 124) is one of the most exciting recent finds to be made in Cameroon. It remains to be seen whether this silver-and-gold gem is a regular visitor to this area. The highly localised **Cricketer Warbler** *Spiloptila clamans*, only discovered here in the last decade, may be found in the small bushes.

Lying just to the north, the town of Waza and the adjacent national park are also a focus of most visits to the region. Desert transformed temporarily to marshlands, the floodplain's waters from last season's rains whittle away to small pools under the sun's parching rays, but still attract a profusion of birdlife. It is worth spending time at the waterholes and surrounding *Acacia* thickets, both in Waza National Park and south of the town along the main road. Most conspicuous are an array of storks, including **Yellow-billed Myceteria** *ibis*, **African Openbill** *Anastomus lamelligerus*, **White Ciconia** *ciconia*, **Woolly-necked** *C. episcopus*, **Saddle-billed Ephippiorhynchus** *senegalensis* and **Marabou** *Leptoptilos crumeniferus*, and impressive flocks of **Black-crowned Crane** *Balearica pavonina*. Large congregations of migrant **Garganey** *Anas querquedula* assemble, with smaller numbers of other waterfowl, whilst wading birds are represented by the likes of **Senegal Thick-knee** *Burhinus senegalensis*, **African Wattled Lapwing** *Vanellus senegallus* and various Palearctic migrant species. The waterholes also entice impressive numbers of granivores to drink, usually dominated by heaving swarms of **Red-billed Quelea** *Quelea quelea*. Other

small finches regularly seen include **African Silverbill** *Lonchura cantans*, **Black-rumped Waxbill** *Estrilda troglodytes*, colourful **Cut-throat** *Amadina fasciata*, **African Quailfinch** *Ortygospiza atricollis* and **Zebra Waxbill** *Amandava subflava*, **Sahel Paradise Whydah** *Vidua orientalis* and **White-rumped Seedeater** *Serinus leucopygius*. Doves thrive in this region and **African Mourning** *Streptopelia decipiens*, **African Collared S.** *roseogrisea*, **European Turtle S.** *turtur* and **Black-billed Wood Doves** *Turtur abyssinicus* are all regular. Just after dusk watch for flocks of **Four-banded Sandgrouse**, and once it is dark you may be fortunate to see **Long-tailed Nightjar** drinking on the wing.

With such a super-abundance of food, raptor numbers are always impressive. Best of all are the intra-African migrants that are present in the dry season: **Grasshopper Buzzard** *Butastur rufipennis* and the remarkable **African Swallow-tailed Kite** *Chelictinia riocourii*. This is one of the only places in Africa where the latter may be fairly common and small groups can be seen flying gracefully overhead. Bird hunters, such as **Gabar** *Micronisus gabar* and **Dark Chanting Goshawks** *Melierax metabates*, and **Red-necked Falco** *chicquera* and **Peregrine Falcons** *F. peregrinus*, run amok among the birds around waterholes, often putting swirling masses to flight. Eagles are well represented and the diverse mammal community supports healthy populations of vultures: watch overhead for flocks of **African White-backed Gyps** *africanus* and **Rüppell's Griffon Vultures** *G. rueppellii*, and the occasional **Lappet-faced Torgos** *tracheliotus*, **White-headed Trigoiceps** *occipitalis* or **Egyptian Vulture** *Neophron percnopterus*. Dense *Acacia* thickets, which are scattered throughout the region, offer the most diverse birding and a good selection of Palearctic migrants and resident species. The diminutive **Sennar Penduline Tit** *Anthoscopus punctifrons*, which combs the finer *Acacia* branches for insects, is highly sought after. **River Prinia** *Prinia fluviatilis*, only recently confirmed for the area, is actually quite common in *Acacia* on alluvial soils. The species' call is clearly different from **Tawny-flanked Prinia** *P. subflava*, which occurs in the adjacent woodlands. **Masked Lanius** *nubicus* and **Isabelline Shrikes** *L. isabellinus* sit and wait for their prey to pass, while **Clapperton's Francolin** *Francolinus clappertoni* actively scratch in the bare earth. **White-billed Buffalo Weaver** *Bubalornis albirostris* is easily found around their large, messy nests, and **Yellow-**

**crowned Gonolek** *Laniarius barbarus* skulks in the thickets. Open country, usually lightly grassed with scattered bushes, should yield a whole suite of other species. Within Waza National Park, watch for **Arabian Bustard** *Ardeotis arabs* stalking among the lightly grassed floodplains, particularly in the early morning. Although this species extends widely across the Sahelian region, Cameroon is one of the only places where it can reliably be seen. **White-bellied Bustard** *Eupodotis senegalensis* is more widespread, together with **Chestnut-bellied Starling** *Lamprolornis pulcher*, bold **Black-headed Lapwing** *Vanellus tectus*, ever-busy **Rufous Cercotrichas** *galactotes* and **Black Scrub Robins** *C. podobe* and dainty **Little Green Bee-eater** *Merops pusillus*.

In the second part of the series we will explore the endemic-rich highland forests of the south, as well as the lowland haunts of Red-headed Picathartes.

### Acknowledgements

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### References

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